

Living the Dream of Making the World a Better Place:
An Essay on Cory Doctorow's
Little Brother

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*Little Brother***

Canadian-born and London-based digital-rights activist, blogger, and science-fiction author, Cory Doctorow, set out to write *Little Brother* as a guide for readers to learn about the “some of the secret stuff going on [in the world and] how the world works and how we got to where we are” (Bernick, et al.) In a 2008 book promotion for *Little Brother* at the Santa Clara Public Library, Doctorow named his main three messages for readers of this book to be (1) that you can take control of same technology that is used against you to invade your privacy; (2) that it is important to have an understanding of statistics and the likelihood of the risk of rare events occurring; and (3) that legislative change is necessary for long term changes, so it is important to be politically involved (Doctorow, *Big Brother Book Tour*, part 2 of 7). These three messages from Doctorow relate to promoting the idea that young people have the right (and the duty) to use information and technology to become self-governing, well-informed citizens who participate in public forums (both online and off) on matters--controversial and otherwise--as a defense against potentially tyrannous powers, all of which forms the basis for intellectual freedom in our democratic society (American Library Association, "Intellectual Freedom, ALAAction No. 2 in a Series").

The book's protagonist, Marcus Yallow, is a powerful voice for Doctorow's message of intellectual freedom in the not-too-distant future of a dystopic San Francisco where the aftermath of a terrorist attack on the Oakland Bay Bridge and BART system results in the city being taken over by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS).

The characters in *Little Brother* must figure out how to cope with the fear of future attacks--a fear that is fueled by the DHS's power to "defend" people's freedom by "tearing up the Bill of Rights," as Marcus (writing as M1K3Y) described it to his fellow Xnetters (Doctorow, *Little Brother*, 83).

Even prior to the terrorist attack, Marcus' narrative provided readers with an eye-opening account of the kinds of surveillance that today's young people are faced with in their schools, their communities, and their homes. In a 2008 interview with teenreads.com, Doctorow reveals his passion for young people's rights to privacy:

Today's kids are the most surveilled, most controlled generation in the history of the world. There's no public space left for kids to play in unregarded, and every place they find that can be theirs is shut down or demonized as a pedophile's dream come true --- this despite the minuscule, infinitesimal proportion of attacks on children that come from strangers they meet on the Internet. ("Author Talk: Cory Doctorow")

To use a vocabulary more in line with the American Library Association's concept of intellectual freedom as embodied in the ALA's Library Bill of Rights and as protected by the First Amendment, first and foremost, "Intellectual freedom is freedom of the mind, and as such, it is both a personal liberty and a prerequisite for all freedoms leading to action" (*Intellectual Freedom Manual*, xvii). Intellectual freedom is the cornerstone of a free society that has a "government of the people, by the people, for the people" (to quote Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address). Marcus recognizes that there is an imbalance of power in his pre- and post-terrorist attack world. After the attack, it becomes overwhelmingly evident that those in power have a lot of power, yet they rely on technology that is inherently prone to being hacked. However, a person that doesn't

have much power in the grand scheme of things, such as Marcus and essentially anyone who chooses to learn how to access the right information, there is an ability to access and find the one point of weakness in the same technology that those in power rely upon. In other words, technology is a tool that can be used by the people to overcome the imbalance of power. Without some way to reapportion the balance of power, citizens are not free “to hold any belief on any subject and to convey their ideas in any form they deem appropriate” (*Intellectual Freedom Manual*, xvii).

From the beginning of *Little Brother*, the reader gets a sense that Marcus has a good deal of knowledge regarding his constitutional rights, the civil rights movement, American history, and contemporary issues in his life that affect his freedoms. While the characters of his parents, Lillian and Drew, are not fleshed out to a great extent, the reader also gets a sense that Marcus' mindset has been influenced by his like-minded parents. It is understandable that Marcus feels betrayed, confused, and at times outraged by Drew Yallow's support of the DHS's efforts to protect the community after the bombing, despite Drew's pre-attack beliefs in the values of personal freedom. In Lillian and Drew Yallow, Doctorow has given the reader two characters that presumably have long-standing roots in support of activism, as well as two very different reactions to having their son gone missing for three days in the aftermath of the bombing and having their community turned into a police state. The fear of a statistically rare recurrence of second attack so close to home coupled with the fear of losing his son drives Drew Yallow to adopt a submissive acceptance of nearly anything the DHS claims is necessary to do their job. Lillian's exchanges with Marcus and Drew suggest that her own mindset regarding the value of personal freedom and privacy has withstood the

horrific test of the attack on her community. I wonder whether Lillian and Drew confronted each other privately specifically about their post-bombing mindsets, however, as partners in marriage and parents of Marcus, Lillian takes on the role of peace-keeper between the two men in her life. I would hope that in extremely trying circumstances, I could aspire to maintain my own values and beliefs regarding intellectual freedom and privacy as well as Lillian Yallow.

The character of Vanessa Pak suggests that Doctorow was very aware of the fact that Marcus could easily cross a line that could result in his harming himself or others. Even while Marcus sincerely believed he was being careful to protect himself and the Xnetters who supported Marcus' online post-bombing personae M1K3Y, the memory of Vanessa confronting him on this point (and the loss of his friendship with her because of this point) made him even more aware of how easily things could spin out of control.

Marcus was very cognizant of the power he held as the originator and unofficial leader of the Xnet movement, and he made great efforts to shift his power back over to the Xnetters by providing them with information and technological tools. However, the one thing he could not give the Xnetters was the direct knowledge that he had been detained by the DHS and how it felt to be of how it felt to be mentally and physically tortured by individuals who were not limited by the law to what they could put you through. Still, Marcus did make every effort to try to convey the seriousness of committing any act that the DHS might be able to use as an excuse for questioning and detainment.

While Marcus had no qualms about reclaiming some of his own privacy by

committing such acts as reprogramming RFID's or disguising his gait so it was unrecognizable by gait-recognition technologies, Doctorow made it clear that Marcus did not commit such acts for the sake of causing societal chaos. Marcus seemed to have a well-developed code of ethics and a deeply introspective sense of personal responsibility toward other people's well being, even when it meant risking his own life by telling his story to the investigative reporter for the Bay Guardian, Barbara Stratford.

Moreover, Marcus was open to learning from his own mistakes as well as the mistakes of other people. While he might have regretted some of the things he did in his resistance efforts against the DHS, and while his motives may have been more selfish in the beginning, Marcus came to realize that he was in a unique position to act within the public sphere in order to defend the constitutional rights of his fellow San Franciscans and all Americans.

While I had heard of Cory Doctorow and had read a few of his blog articles on Boing Boing prior to having read *Little Brother* for this course, I was not familiar with his activist-oriented roots. In preparing to write this paper, I did a good deal of research on Doctorow's views, including his extensive body of presentations within the library field. Recently, for instance, at the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom's Conference on Privacy and Youth in March of 2011, Doctorow strongly suggested that librarians are able to communicate "with enormous moral authority" and that they are "perfectly positioned" to engage the community (and especially the youth) about privacy issues and to promote the use of information resources and technologies that can relieve the imbalance of power currently had over most individuals (often without their knowledge and/or understanding of the implications) by such entities as the government, law

enforcement authorities, and the marketing/commercial sectors (Goldberg; "Cory Doctorow's Radical Proposition for Libraries"). Doctorow is a passionate advocate for the right to access information anonymously, in an informed manner, and without fear of punishment or exploitation, which are all crucial elements of individual liberty in a democracy. Doctorow is also committed to staying current in his uniquely broad understanding of ever-evolving privacy issues in multiple contexts, cultures, and subcultures, which I admire.

What's more, Doctorow is a compelling and inspiring speaker and writer who provides an accessible model for others who are in the process of developing their own advocate-voices on issues related to intellectual freedom. As pointed out by book reviewer, Philip Bernick, Doctorow's *Little Brother* repeatedly poses the questions to its characters and to the reader, "What are the effects of our choices? Is what we do the right thing even if it looks wrong to others? How would someone make do in a crisis?" Cory Doctorow's mission seems to be to challenge those in unique positions to affect change—such as librarians—to go beyond philosophical rhetoric and consider the effects of our choices... NOW. In short, Cory Doctorow (and his *Little Brother* character, Marcus Yallow) is living the dream of making the world a better place.

For me as a library science student, having completed this Seminar in Intellectual Freedom, I am inspired by Doctorow's model, and am committed to continuing to learn more about the issues related to intellectual freedom, seeking out other individuals and organizations who advocate for intellectual freedom, and considering how current events in the news may have intellectual freedom implications. In line with the communications skills recommended by the American Library Association's Intellectual

Freedom Round Table's Intellectual Freedom Core Competencies, I will develop my own voice by taking advantage of teachable moments by sharing what I learn with my friends, family, co-workers, and classmates (both orally and in writing).

As a future library professional, one lingering question that I have is whether I will be able to maintain my optimism about finding a position within an organization that values individuals who have a natural inclination toward intellectual freedom advocacy (and advocacy in general). I realize that many libraries as an organization will “toe the party line” and claim to value intellectual freedom because they realize the American Library Association expects them to do so. However, some libraries have a brave leadership that truly strive to engage and empower all of its professional librarians and staff to, in turn, engage and empower the community on issues related to privacy and intellectual freedom. I wonder whether I will be fortunate enough to work for such a library. In the words of the great John Lennon, *“You may say that I’m a dreamer. But I’m not the only one.”*

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